

# Jerusalem Letters

## **Esther: Be the Miracle**

By Yoram Hazony, March 13, 2016

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*You can read the original [here](#).*

The book of Esther is in many ways the most political in the Bible.

This isn't because of a lack of politics in the rest of Scripture.

There are plenty of political teachings in Genesis or Judges or Jeremiah.

But Esther is different because God is never mentioned explicitly, so the political action is tightly focused on what human beings can do—and must do—in the face of the terrifying political events of their time.

The story of Esther takes place in the court of Ahashverosh, king of Persia (a.k.a. Xerxes I, who ruled Persia from 486-465 BCE). Fearing for his safety after a failed attempt on his life, the king appoints a Hitler-like adviser, Haman, to be prime minister, and orders all of Persia to prostrate itself before his absolute rule. When a Jewish official, Mordechai, refuses to accept this decision, Haman persuades the king to exterminate all the Jews of the empire.

What can one human being do in the face of such evil? The Bible offers us an answer in the story of Esther, Mordechai's orphaned cousin, whom he raised from childhood. Mordechai teaches Esther how to play politics, and with determination and skill, she succeeds in winning the favor of the king and becoming queen of Persia. But when the decree to murder her people is announced, Esther finds herself trapped between bone-chilling alternatives: Should she risk the wrath of both Haman and the king by

demanding that their bloodthirsty anti-Semitic policy be repealed? Or should she try to preserve her favor with the king while she looks for an opening to do some good?

Many of us know how to gain favor with others by working hard, demonstrating our talents, and displaying kindness and grace in all we do. But what if this is only the easy part? For each and every one of us, there comes a critical moment when we have to choose whether to risk all the favor and affection we've gained by suddenly being "difficult": That is, by making demands on those around us that we know will not make them happy—demands that we have to make anyway because we know they're just. This is true in all spheres of life, but it is especially true in politics: You make your way up the ladder by pleasing your superiors. But then that moment inevitably comes when you have to stop pleasing and stand up for your own interests or for a cause that you know is right.

This occurs in Scripture time and again: Joseph, Daniel, and Nehemia all faced it. And their stories are all marked with *fear*—the fear that if you make a demand of your own, you'll suddenly lose favor. And in politics, when you lose favor, you lose everything.

When Esther reaches this moment, she is afraid too: Haman is all-powerful in Persia. Will he have her humiliated? Deposed? Executed?

But Esther's greatest fear is that she will fail. Haman's grip on the king is total, so she doesn't believe a direct assault on his bloodthirsty policy can succeed. The king, after all, has already agreed to it and signed the decree. What's the chance that Ahashverosh will change his mind at her request? Just about zero.

What is needed is an indirect assault—one that will do so much damage to the prime minister's standing with the king that Ahashverosh will start thinking he had better start getting policy advice from someone else.

For three days, Esther fasts and prays. But mostly she plots her moves for the political struggle to come. She'll ask for the life of her people all right. But the key point is this: She decides not to make this move until she has succeeded arousing the king's suspicions against Haman. She will try to get him to think that there may be something going on between her and Haman. Could there be a sexual interest between the prime minister and the queen? Or could there be another plot afoot against the king's life?

She drops a hint, and then a second. He's not too bright. But in the end, the king takes the bait, and in a famous sleepless night begins to ask himself whether he hasn't put too much faith in this monstrous Haman. Once the king starts going wobbly on his prime minister, Esther makes further moves—eventually having Haman deposed, installing Mordechai as prime minister, getting an edict of her own issued so the Jews can defend themselves, and then organizing Jewish military power so the Jews emerge victorious on the day that their children, women and men were all to have died.

This is all straight politics, pursued with guts and skill. So where is God in this completely human, political story? Remember that Esther fasted for three days, asking for God's help. Why did she need God's help if her political skills are so good?

The theology of the book of Esther is itself something of a marvel. We don't see God's acts in grand-stand miracles like the parting of the Red Sea. But there is a miracle in Esther nonetheless: As a number of indications in the text make clear, it is Esther herself who becomes God's miracle. In turning aside from the road of complacency and cowardice, in facing down the fear

that grips her, in inventing and going forward with her audacious plan, and in ultimately pulling it all off, Esther's own choices and actions make her the principal instrument of God's will in this story.

For us, this fact offers us an extraordinary teaching. In our time, with our own eyes, we see the rapid growth of evil in the world, just as it was in Esther's day. And today, as then, God often seems to be nowhere to be found. But the book of Esther teaches that when evil has grown too great and God's face seems hidden, God may actually be posing a question to each one of us: Do we risk the comfort of our respectable, successful, quiet lives, to break with the existing order of growing evil and make a stand to bring God's will and what is truly right into the world? As Mordechai tells his young cousin: "Who knows whether it is not for such a time as this that you have come into royalty." (Esther 4.14)

True, we're aren't all at the level of the queen in Persia—at least not yet. But all of us have a certain measure of favor and popularity and status that we have gained over long years. Have we ever thought about whether it is not for such a time as this that we were placed here? That God has quietly given us the chance to become the miracle that is so badly needed here and now?

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**Special Bonus Video:**  
**Sen. Tim Scott on Esther**



My wife Yael heard United States Senator Tim Scott speaking about Esther a few months ago at a Christians United for Israel event in San Antonio and told me about it. Recent years have seen a tidal wave of rising Christian interest in Esther, and this remarkable speech reflects what's happening well. If you don't know anything about this, give Scott a listen.